



Monetized Interactions in the Sexual Minorities Network at Daneshjoo Park (Tehran, Iran)

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Abstract

Daneshjoo Park is located in the center of Tehran and is the first hang-out for modern life in the city, gathering different communities such as students, artists, and various lifestyles. Over the years, it has become the most famous hang-out for LGBTQ communities. Despite its significance and hundreds of visitors per day from different parts of the country, Daneshjoo Park has faced years of neglect. This study, employing grounded theory as a research method and in-depth interview as a gathering data method, investigates the emergence of sex work in the park. Participants, aged 18–40, active or retired sex workers, were selected using theoretical and snowball sampling. The findings highlight that underlying individual circumstances, such as poverty, act as catalysts for creating conditions conducive to engaging in sex work, referred to as “Individual Background Conditions.” These conditions facilitate entry into the social network of sex workers, thereby enabling the manifestation of the phenomenon of sex work within Daneshjoo Park, where individuals are gravitated to engage in sex work. The study identifies “Actualizing Interaction Conditions” as the supportive and reproductive causal mechanism through which the network operates, bringing individuals with these background conditions into the fold. This mechanism has enabled the manifestation of the phenomenon of sex work within Daneshjoo Park. The research also identifies a significant historical shift, termed the “Historical Factor,” indicating a transition in the logic of interaction from traditional forms of interaction to monetary exchanges, which has fundamentally altered the landscape of sex work in the park. Ultimately, the study suggests social empowerment strategies as a response to these findings.

Keywords Sex work · Non-heterosexual persons · Daneshjoo Park · Grounded theory · Iran

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Introduction

Cities serve as repositories of history, embodying the essence of the modern age and serving as the bedrock of societal evolution. Capital cities, in particular, encapsulate a nation's historical journey, with each facet bearing a fragment of its collective narrative. Tehran, Iran's political and economic hub for over two centuries, stands as the epicenter of the nation's contemporary political and historical landscape. However, despite its profound significance, there remains a dearth of research and urban studies comprehensively exploring its diverse components. While major cities worldwide have been subject to numerous sociological studies with historical lenses, Tehran's urban phenomena, notably its Daneshjoo Park, have received comparatively scant attention. Based on research through Google Scholar by the author, there are a few articles about the park that mostly regard the park as a part of Tehran and from an urban design perspective. With a history spanning over half a century, Daneshjoo Park emerges as a poignant emblem of Tehran's urban culture, harboring untold tales waiting to be unearthed.

Constructed in 1967, Daneshjoo Park spans an expanse of 3200 square meters at the Valiasr intersection in Tehran. Originally part of the New Tehran development project, the Park and City Theatre complex-*Teatre Shahr*- were envisioned as focal points for cultural enrichment. Over time, the City Theatre evolved into a vibrant hub for university students and artists alike. Comprising various components, Daneshjoo Park boasts a multifaceted identity. At its heart lies the historic City Theatre, a testament to its enduring legacy. Today, the park encompasses several distinct areas, including convenient access points such as the Teatre Shahr MRT and BRT entrances located on the northwest side. Street vendors encircle the MRT entrance, complemented by adjacent water features that enhance the park's ambiance. A public library enriches the southern side, while a designated children's playground caters to younger visitors. Central water features serve as a focal point, surrounded by grass, flowers, and trees, a restaurant, and restroom facilities integrated throughout the park.

Why Daneshjoo Park?

The necessity to comprehend the multifaceted lifeworlds within Daneshjoo Park, coupled with the absence of a comprehensive, locally-grounded portrayal, drives the inquiry addressed in this study. For nearly five decades, Tehran's Daneshjoo Park has served as a prominent gathering hub for LGBTQ communities. Initially established as a contemporary urban space attracting artists, students, and individuals living modern lifestyles, a cultural center boasting theaters frequented by artists and students alike, while maintaining its renown among LGBTQ communities.

Since this park is one of the first places that represents modernity, it served as the first hang-out spot in Tehran, embodying a culture of acceptance and diversity. By that, I mean this park brought together new appearances and lifestyles like artists and their fashion, along with students and their youthful styles, within

a society undergoing heteronormalization. As a result, transgender individuals and gay people, who are minorities in the broader society, found more acceptance in the park compared to other urban spaces in Tehran. Over the years, this park, located in the city center, has become famously associated with the LGBTQ community. Today, despite the existence of other spots for the community in Tehran, Daneshjoo Park remains the most well-known gathering place for them.

It is important to explain the cultural and legal context of the park's location. Tehran, the capital of Iran, is governed by Sharia law as enforced by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Legally, transgender individuals are allowed to receive sex-affirmation surgery and wear clothing appropriate to their gender identity with government permission after the fatwa (religious decree) issued by Ayatollah Khomeini. Also, a legal process has been established for gender reassignment. The Family Protection Law, enacted in 2012, outlines the conditions for applying for gender reassignment through the family court. However, homosexuality is considered a sin and is illegal, with severe punishments for same-sex intercourse. This leads to many gay individuals concealing their sexual orientation and facing social challenges, while transgender individuals also experience significant social difficulties. Homosexual relationships are not tolerated by the government. However, from a cultural and social perspective, they are relatively more accepted in large cities like Tehran by residents. This relative acceptance leads to some concerns about trusting a customer, but it is not significantly addressed as a challenge by participants in Daneshjoo Park. It is important to note that this trust does not necessarily exist in other areas.

The challenges related to expressing sexual identity are more political than cultural. In Daneshjoo Park, the political factor is ambiguous due to the government's unclear policy, which combines denial and ignorance. The government is aware of the park's reputation but often acts as if this lifestyle does not exist, though occasionally they conduct "operations" to detain members of the community. In other parts of Tehran, such appearances might be ignored, but no other place in the city hosts as many LGBTQ individuals as Daneshjoo Park.

To provide a more comprehensive image of the park, it is important to describe its atmosphere. Gay individuals do not experience difficulties based on their appearance, as it does not differ from heterosexuals. However, transgender individuals face challenges due to their appearance. Legally, they are allowed to wear clothing of the opposite gender and wear makeup, but not all possess the legal documents. They can be arrested for this elsewhere, but in the park, such appearances are more informally accepted by authorities. Engaging in sex for money or not is strictly prohibited in the park, with the most intimate visible action being hugging. Sex workers take clients to their homes or the clients' places for services. Additionally, an old public bathhouse near the park has historically served as a dating spot and is used as an alternative when private options are unavailable.

Entering the park and contacting visitors is unrestricted, but involving the community can be challenging. Community members are conservative due to legal circumstances, but socializing with them is not difficult. Conducting interviews is difficult as they are hesitant to trust and share personal information and narratives, a challenge discussed in the methods section of this research.

These circumstances, along with the importance of demand and supply in the market for sex work, have heightened the park's significance. As Dank et al. (2015) illustrated the role of social support among sex workers in New York, similar social bonds in Daneshjoo Park foster familiarity, knowledge sharing about the work, and connections with potential clients and suppliers, thus establishing the community's necessity and the space's importance (Dank et al., 2015, p. 68). Delany (1999) emphasizes the importance of urban spaces for marginalized communities in the context of queer theories. He argues that these communities create "contact" as opposed to "networking," which is "established within the protocols of capitalist competition," to provide support for marginalized groups, as Reid-Pharr mentions in the introduction. This feature of urban spaces fosters connections beyond gender, race, class, etc., highlighting the necessity of considering urban spaces to better understand LGBT communities (Delany, 2019, p. xii).

The essentiality of urban spaces for marginalized communities informs this study's focus on one such important space in Tehran. To understand the LGBTQ community, specifically sex workers in Tehran, Daneshjoo Park plays a pivotal role. This study delves specifically into the establishment of social networks for queer sex workers within the park, narrowing its focus to this aspect while setting aside others. This park hosts more GBT sex workers compared to other locations.

Daneshjoo Park as a Broader Global Issue

Several factors contribute to transgender and male sex work in the park, with social exclusion being a significant determinant. Social exclusion can create conditions where individuals view sex work as a viable solution. Studies by Coleman (1989), Allen (1980), Boyer (1989), D'Ippoliti and Botti (2017), and Bolivar (2021) have explored the impact of social exclusion on sex work. Additionally, research has highlighted the role of immigration in exacerbating social exclusion among transgender individuals and homosexuals, thus influencing their involvement in sex work (Capous-Desyllas & Loy, 2020; Ellison & Weitzer, 2017; Howe et al., 2008; Sausa et al., 2007). Migration often disrupts established social networks and, when combined with familial rejection, creates significant barriers to integration into society. Consequently, individuals may turn to sex work as a means of survival in such circumstances.

Poverty emerges as a significant factor influencing the decision to engage in sex work at Daneshjoo Park, a notion supported by numerous studies worldwide. While poverty, both absolute and relative, does not solely determine participation in sex work among LGBTQ+ community members in the park, it serves as a foundational condition, as indicated by other studies in different contexts (Sausa et al., 2007; D'Ippoliti & Botti, 2017; Dank et al., 2015). Research, such as that conducted by Anna Luisa Liguori and Peter Aggleton, underscores poverty as a contributing factor to engagement in same-sex commercial sex, even among heterosexual men (Aggleton, 2001).

Moreover, studies such as those by Karimi (2018) and Mohammadi (2017), which examine the quality of life of sexual minorities in Iran, underscore the profound

impact of rejection and social exclusion. These studies reveal that individuals often face rejection, familial and social isolation, displacement, and poverty. Many studies indicate that transgender individuals may turn to sex work out of financial necessity to afford hormone injections, plastic surgery, and other expenses related to maintaining their sexual identity (Bolivar, 2021; Davidson-Arad and Leichtentritt, 2004; Howe et al., 2008; Jennings Mayo-Wilson et al., 2020; Sausa et al., 2007). Securing funding for surgeries, hormone therapy, and purchasing women's clothing are cited as some of the reasons in these studies. This study similarly identifies exclusion as a pivotal factor in influencing individuals' decisions to engage in sex work.

While these studies acknowledge the psychological effects of shame, discrimination, and denial among LGBTQ+ individuals, they do not explicitly establish a causal link between these experiences and engagement in sex work. These issues have been widely documented in the current literature within the LGBTQ+ community, regardless of their involvement in sex work (Davidson-Arad and Leichtentritt, 2004; Infante et al., 2009; Moradi et al., 2023; Nemoto et al., 2004; Sausa et al., 2007; Sawicki et al., 2019; Yadegarfar, 2019). However, D'Ippoliti and Botti (2017) mentioned the experience of discrimination as a push factor into sex work in their interviews.

While global research has identified incentives such as pull and push factors driving individuals into this line of work, as these issues have been mentioned in this study and during interviews, further investigation was needed to comprehend this phenomenon within this specific park.

The necessity of integrating queer and social exclusion theories with localized perspectives highlights that Daneshjoo Park is not merely a safe space for sex work and non-monetized relationships within the LGBTQ community. Understanding its existence before its association with sex work and its evolution from a supportive network is crucial for comprehending the phenomenon specific to this location. To illustrate this, a theoretical example is provided.

Durkheim, in "Suicide," employs a method to elevate social facts beyond individual circumstances. He posits that while personal conditions or "individual factors" may influence an individual's decision to commit suicide, societal demands and the impact of collective conscience play a pivotal role. In Durkheim's theory, he argues that for the existence of the phenomenon, there are different levels of causalities. The proximal cause consists of psychological factors that determine an individual's propensity to commit suicide. In contrast, the distal cause driving the phenomenon is the social fact, which imposes a collective demand for sacrifice (Durkheim, 2005, p. 288).

Applying this to the creation of the sex work network within Daneshjoo Park, the proximal causalities include general social reasons such as poverty and facilitating causes like social exclusion. These factors compel individuals towards sex work within Tehran's society. However, the ultimate cause for this phenomenon is the historical factor that led to the emergence and monetization of this network. Other social and psychological factors bring relevant individuals into the community and strengthen it.

Universal theories, such as queer theories, can elucidate the first category of factors described in the results section, but they fall short in explaining why this park

serves as a hub for sex workers in Tehran, not others. This is because the reasons for sex work within the LGBTQ community, as mentioned in the results section, extend beyond general explanations. In the context of a city that has undergone heteronormalization, the prominence of Daneshjoo Park and its role in attracting LGBTQ individuals is not rooted in the social exclusion imposed by society during the park's early days. Initially, the relationships formed there were more accepted than they later became. Therefore, it cannot be said that the park originally served as a refuge for marginalized groups. Over time, as the park evolved, its network shifted towards a monetized nature, yet it persisted and continued to function in a way that has not been replicated elsewhere in the city.

This study focuses on the phenomenon within Daneshjoo Park, not the entirety of Tehran. In the results section, "Individual Background Conditions" and "Actualizing Interaction Conditions" illustrate the global aspects of this phenomenon. However, the "Historical Factor" explains why Daneshjoo Park, within the cultural context described by Najmabadi in Tehran and Iran, is renowned for its LGBTQ and sex worker communities. Exploring local factors and constructing a framework based on historical and cultural contexts is essential. To understand why this park, among other locations, holds historical significance, Najmabadi's theory is indispensable.

Najmabadi's Theory

The conceptual framework of this study is based on a local theoretical perspective. As the final factor behind the construction of the sex work network in the park is historical and hinges on culture, the regional and historical views under "Shahid-Bazi" are the main in-progress framework with a distinguished approach to this phenomenon. It describes and explains the history of romantic/sexual relationships in the past Iran and precisely before modernity in the Safavid dynasty and Qajar Iran when they were "normal." One of the best scholarly books in this approach is "Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity" by Afsaneh Najmabadi. The author refers to the literature and paintings in the Safavid and Qajar periods to describe an aesthetic and cultural sexuality rotation in Iran. In her opinion, beauty and attraction were not determined by gender, but men and women had the same aesthetic features. Derivative from the mystical time, the aesthetics were the beauty of the God, and all emergencies were the evidence of the God's beauty; the aesthetics were attended in neutral sexuality—the poets and paintings that this author mentions are evidence of male-to-male attraction in romance.

The vivid picture of this love appeared in the arts and sexual culture of Shahid-Bazi and Jamal-Bazi or the tendency to man-to-man romance, which is ascertainable in royalty's manuscripts and foreign tourists' reports who visited Iran in that era. A variety of examples of male-to-male attraction are mentioned in this book. Also, the history of "normalizing heterosexuality" as a result of encountering modernity is tracked by Najmabadi. The author, contrary to typical literature that addressed this attraction as the result of the sexual/social gap between men and women and

the women's isolation, claims that those were not the reasons. This orientation has a distinguished and independent identity (Najmabadi, 2005).

As observed in this study, the verbal evidence of this approach was evident in the data, reflecting consistent values across different periods in Daneshjoo Park. This aspect has been elucidated in the "Historical Factor" section, offering a logical explanation for this phenomenon in the park. It addresses how this social network has been constructed, how the logic of interaction has been changed to monetized relationships, how this current network attracts individuals with mentioned factors to become sex workers, and why this place has become a focal point in Tehran.

The Current Study

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the factors contributing to the formation of the sex work network in Daneshjoo Park, also known as "Father's Garden" or "Baghe Pedari" within the park's communities. This study seeks to answer several key questions: why this park was chosen, how the network operates, what personal motivations drive individuals to engage in this business, and what the repercussions are.

While existing works have shed light on the life conditions of LGBTQ individuals in Iran from legal, political, and health perspectives (Eftekhar et al., 2020; Karimi & Bayatrizi, 2018; Yadegarfar, 2019), this study specifically focuses on understanding the reasons behind sex work in one of Iran's renowned hangouts for the LGBTQ community. This inquiry aims to contribute to the broader literature on this topic, providing insights into this phenomenon within Iran and potentially enhancing global understanding.

The research involved interviewing individuals aged 18–40 who were either currently engaged in sex work or had retired but possessed knowledge of the park's narratives and experiences. The concept of "individual background conditions" explored in this research typically indicated general reasons behind attending sex work among queers, as discussed in the existing literature. The attribution of local and cultural elements argued as the "historical factor" behind the construction of this network in this specific park, is comprehensively analyzed within a new discourse developed by scholars such as Afsaneh Najmabadi.

Method

In this study, the author has applied grounded theory, following the framework established by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Throughout the study, there was a dynamic interaction between theory and data, continually refining to achieve better alignment. Initially drawing from queer and exclusion theories and identified issues within LGBTQ sex work, the research gradually developed a more localized theory, considering cultural nuances.

Participants

In this study, participants were selected based on various factors such as gender, age, employment status, living arrangements, immigration status, and income. This selection process involved initial interactions with potential participants during a pre-study stage, as well as snowball sampling through participant recommendations and suggestions provided by narrators familiar with the community dynamics.

Before commencing the study, the author spent approximately 1 year visiting the park to gain an understanding of its atmosphere and community dynamics. This initial phase helped identify the first set of participants. During this period, participants were informed that the author was a researcher conducting a study on Daneshjoo Park. Subsequently, additional participants were identified through referrals from existing participants, primarily from the initial group. To ensure a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the data, individuals with diverse backgrounds were included in the study.

Some of the participants were introduced by Kiarash, a narrator familiar with both old and new members of the park's community. This sampling process continued until saturation was reached across different aspects of the theory. It's noteworthy that some participants withdrew from participation in the project. Reasons for their withdrawal included:

1. Sensitivity of the subject matter in the region and potential legal consequences.
2. Lack of trust in the interviewer.
3. A belief that the research results would not be beneficial to them.

The second group of participants was less common, as it took over a year for the researcher to become acquainted with them through introductions from mutual acquaintances in the park.

Data Collection and Analysis

To establish connections between the current data and the park's history and community dynamics, ongoing interviews were conducted with narrators who provided insights spanning different eras of the park. These interviews proved invaluable in bridging the gap between current observations and historical contexts, with the narrator offering valuable perspectives that complemented the data collected.

In this study, in-depth, iterative, and non-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection. Interviews typically ranged from approximately two to four sessions, each lasting about one hour. The minimum interview was 1 hour and the interviews with the narrator were the longest over four two-hour conversations. Additionally, observational techniques were employed to complement the interview data. Observations helped to elucidate aspects of the interviewees' statements and provided additional context to better understand their perspectives.

The author conducted and recorded the interviews. Each interview took place individually in the park. No notes were taken during interviews. All participants were briefed about the research objectives, the recording of conversations, and the assurance of their confidentiality and safety, with assurances that records would be deleted after the coding stage. As per procedure, all interviews were expunged after coding, and the names mentioned in the article are anonymized. The following questions as guidelines were formulated after the author spent a year integrating into the community. Subsequent inquiries were tailored to the conversation's flow and content.

1. Could you share some personal background information, such as your age, gender identity, employment status, stage of gender transition if relevant, income level, immigration status, and accommodation situation?
2. What led you to visit the park, and how often do you frequent it?
3. Who are the individuals you socialize with or consider friends in the park? (distinguishing between those within the sex work and LGBTQ+ communities who frequent the park as a social gathering spot)
4. Could you discuss the concept of "business" in the park? If the participant acknowledges engagement in business activities, what motivates you to start their business here? If not, could you share your observations on what motivates others to start businesses in the park?
5. Why did you choose to conduct your business specifically in this park rather than elsewhere?
6. How would you characterize the nature of your friendships with the people you've met here?
7. From your perspective, what are the personal impacts of your involvement in this job on your life?

Maxqda 2020 software was utilized for data coding purposes. The results were shared with the participants to ensure their agreement with the validity. The narrator, in particular, played a pivotal role in reviewing the entire explanation. The data were coded by the author.

Results

The study's participants encompass individuals fitting the definition of sex workers, including both immigrants and Tehran residents. A total of 23 interviews were conducted, striving for comprehensive coverage and alignment with emerging theoretical needs. Only one participant was married, and none exceeded 40 years old. This involved participants recommending others within the social network who met the interview criteria. Notably, this approach leveraged the knowledge and connections of older members within the park, often considered the third-generation narrators of the park's life world. Interviews with these individuals were the most extensive.

Individual Background Conditions

To draw attention to the primary cause behind the phenomenon—a historical shift in the role of money and its repercussions on the social network within the park—a discussion on “individual background conditions” will precede. This concept pertains to the personal circumstances individuals bring to the park, distinct from its inherent nature. Each individual carries a set of background conditions, which, despite being social in identity, are not exclusively shaped by the present park community but rather by broader societal contexts.

In this context, the notion of individuality regards sex workers as actors whose “actions” are influenced by and carry meaning from society. According to Max Weber’s framework, this distinction sets their actions apart from mere “behavior,” indicating that the theme is social in nature and understood in relation to society and culture (Weber, 2019, p. 99). The underlying themes illustrate the societal foundations of sex work in the park as part of a broader global issue—specifically LGBT sex work—with shared features, rather than being solely local, such as the sex work network in the park. While these actions are socially oriented, they do not solely stem from the local community. Instead, they are categorized as “individual background conditions,” which include factors such as poverty, limited access to both permanent and temporary employment, familial exclusion, and the financial burden of sex reassignment surgery. These factors either drive individuals to the park or motivate current members to join the social network, thereby perpetuating its existence.

Poverty

Most interviewees have turned to sex work in Daneshjoo Park due to experiencing different types of poverty. This poverty takes various shapes. For some people, reaching the point of being unable to provide food and housing was why they turned to sex workers. In many interviews, lack of access to the basics of life was mentioned as the reason. The impossibility of providing food and housing is the most critical component of the experience of absolute poverty. Also, relative poverty, which includes needing to provide cosmetic products and clothes, has been mentioned considerably frequently.

Although poverty has been listed as a factor in activating the motivation for sex work, it was also observed among the sex workers who had not experienced poverty; consequently, poverty emerges as a facilitative condition for engaging in sex work at Daneshjoo Park. Below are some examples of the types of poverty expressed by the interviewees.

Mina- Transgender M to F- 26 years old:

“I was living in the park for six months that I had been homeless”

Hesam- Gay- 19 years old- Immigrant and student:

“Well, I didn’t have any money. I had to pay off my installments. I had to pay for the dorm... Yeah, it was a bit tough, but then when I ran out of money, I started this business.”

Niloufar- Transgender M to F- 18 years old:

“I always wished I could afford everything from cosmetics to the clothes I wanted to wear, but I never had enough money. No one was there to help me, so I had to figure things out on my own. I used to stand on the street, hoping someone would come and offer me a price for what I had, and then I would go with them... That was my job. When people bothered me, I wouldn’t go. But when I needed money and couldn’t get it from anywhere else, I had to start sex work.”

Social Exclusion

In addition to grappling with poverty, familial rejection emerges as another pivotal factor driving individuals toward sex work. When individuals face rejection from their families, they not only lose emotional support but also often lose financial assistance, compelling them to seek alternative means of income. This often leads them to consider sex work as a means to cover living expenses.

Furthermore, it’s essential to note that social exclusion from the family alone does not exclusively precipitate the emergence of sex work within Daneshjoo Park. Instead, it falls under the broader category of individual background conditions.

Majid- Homosexual- 28 years gender questioning¹ while taking Hormon medicins:

“I don’t go home. I don’t like to hide myself (identity). When you’re at home, you have to hide yourself from yourself.”

Mina-Transgender M to F- 26 years old”.

“When I realized it myself, I went home with a cake box. My mother was shocked; she treated me like a stranger. I told my father much later. He didn’t accept me. They kicked me out. They harassed and bothered me to leave. They restricted me. They wouldn’t let me go anywhere. They wouldn’t give me any money, and in the end, they kicked me out.”

The assumption that social exclusion inevitably leads to engagement in sex work is not valid in the park. While social exclusion can contribute to laying the groundwork for sex work, it does not serve as a sole determinant or ultimate cause, there are instances of LGBTQ+ individuals within Daneshjoo Park who reside with their families and are supported by them, yet still engage in sex work. Specifically within the context of Daneshjoo Park, social exclusion cannot be regarded as a definitive factor beyond the broader framework of “individual background conditions.” It is

¹ Majid is not self-defined as gay, transgender, or other gender identities.

crucial to recognize that experiencing social exclusion does not automatically propel individuals towards sex work. Instead, there exists a nuanced interplay between the experience of rejection and the subsequent engagement in sex work.

Employment

Individuals within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly those identifying as transgender, often encounter formidable barriers in their pursuit of employment opportunities. The intricate legal landscape, coupled with pervasive cultural prejudices within some workplaces, presents formidable challenges for transgender individuals seeking stable employment. Unlike homosexuals, who may navigate their work without conspicuous markers of gender identity, transgender individuals face heightened discrimination and scrutiny.

Niloufar- Transgender M to F- 18 years old:

“I didn’t know I could also do sales, but whenever I tried, they harassed and bothered me or didn’t pay me my wages. For example, when I worked in a store, they would talk to me in a certain way, or like not paying my wages or sexually harassing me. They neither paid me nor stopped harassing me; they played with my mind and body. They couldn’t understand me. Sometimes I told myself it’s a sin (sex work). I couldn’t take it anymore. Business (sex work) isn’t a good thing, so I started selling clothes in the subway. Even then, I was bothered more when I dressed like a boy and behaved like a boy. I thought it was strange. In the metro, everyone says something or bothers, in a way. Now I’ve decided to get a place for myself and I have to start selling myself on the street at night.”

Nastaran- Transgender M to F- 26 years old:

“Before business (sex work), I used to do many things, from organizing events to working in restaurants. I was a secretary in a restaurant. A customer would call every day. I’d answer the phone or the manager would. Well, it was suspicious; he’d call every day. Now, come on, swear it... I was also a simple worker, but in an environment where people came from everywhere, they looked at you differently. You’d be bothered. Well, they would understand (my identity) then, now they’d either show a bad attitude or mock you. It would escalate into an argument or you had to endure it.”

Maryam- Transgender M to F- 28 years old:

“I lost my job and wanted to go back to work, but because I used hormones, I wasn’t the same as before, where I didn’t have the patience to go to work. That’s why I couldn’t go back to work anymore.”

Mina- Transgender M to F- 26 years old:

“Wherever I went looking for work, they realized I was transgender and wouldn’t give me a job. I tried very hard, but every time they said, “We can’t hire a transgender person.”

Moreover, beyond these hurdles, it's essential to acknowledge the comparative advantage of sex work over traditional employment avenues in terms of income generation. There are LGBTQ+ members within the park who opt for sex work due to its perceived financial advantages over other potential career paths. This preference is especially pronounced among transgender individuals in the network, whose options for employment are significantly limited. This is influenced by various factors such as educational background, social class, and other variables beyond the scope of this study, which may be shaped by different forms of discrimination within society. For instance, during interviews, "flyer distribution" emerged as a suggested alternative to sex work, yet such opportunities pale in comparison to the income potential offered by sex work.

Hesam- Homosexual- 19 years old:

"I went looking for work, but I didn't want to be like before {before sex work}. It wasn't as hard for me anymore {doing sex work}. The second time I went {sex work}, I bought an outfit, and the next time I bought something else... At that time, before starting sex work, when you thought about it, you didn't know how much income sex workers actually had. You thought they made a lot of money... It made a big difference. I wanted to earn forty thousand {toman} a day so that by night, it would be six hundred thousand {toman}. Anyone would choose this job."

Costs of Gender-Affirming Surgery

In addition to the mentioned challenges, there are also significant expenses associated with gender reassignment surgeries that must be accounted for. These surgical procedures vary depending on whether an individual is transitioning from female to male or male to female.

The expenses of gender reassignment surgeries encompass a range of procedures, including penile reassignment surgery, hysterectomy, breast augmentation or removal, facial reconstruction, and hormone therapy. For many transgender individuals in the park, the financial burden of covering these surgical costs serves as a motivating factor for engaging in sex work. It is important to note that all transgender participants in the study identified as male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals. When comparing two groups of sex workers—gay men and trans women—the latter group tends to earn higher wages in the park. This observation aligns with findings by Poteat et al. (2015), who concluded that more feminine appearances increase earning potential. In a heteronormalized culture—as Najmabadi described, referring heteronormalization of love in Qajar Iran²-the criminalization, discrimination, and legal repercussions associated with homosexuality contribute significantly to the high rate of sex affirmation surgeries. Consequently, individuals with "sexual or gender non-conformity" are more likely to undergo sex change surgery as a way to align with legal norms (Bahreini, 2009; Mohsenian-Rahman, 2015).

² (Najmabadi, 2005, p. 46).

Furthermore, during the research, many participants exhibited confusion about their gender identity, largely due to a lack of accurate information and awareness about gender diversity. This lack of understanding, coupled with higher earning potential for trans women and the prevailing legal and cultural conditions, has led to an increased number of transsexual individuals, predominantly male-to-female, frequenting the park. Notably, there were no instances of female-to-male (FTM) sex workers observed in the park.

Maryam- Transgender M t F- 28 years old:

“I used to come {doing sex work} reluctantly. For example, I needed 1200 for the doctor, and my family would say, “We’ve given you formal written consent {A formal prerequisite confirmation by parents needed for court to allow sexual transition}, but the rest is up to you. You have to handle it yourself.” They consented, but I was also forced {to sex work} because I hadn’t any job. For example, if I want to go to a dermatologist or get laser treatment, I’m forced to do business{sex work}.”

Abovementioned facests, while significant factors, are not the sole determinants of the emergence and persistence of sex work within the Daneshjoo Park environment. In this context, these issues do not serve as definitive indicators, as evidenced by the presence of individuals living in poverty who do not engage in sex work, as well as those who sell sex without experiencing social exclusion. Consequently, it becomes crucial to identify the primary factor that ultimately indicates the reason for sex work within the specific context of Daneshjoo Park. This factor must not only address the dynamics of the park but also offer insights into the broader question of what drives sex work in this particular setting.

As emphasized by Peter Davies and Rayah Feldman in their article “Selling Sex in Cardiff and London,” featured in Aggleton’s book (2001), street workers often navigate complex patterns of personal and social support. A similar dynamic is evident in “Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ Youth, YMSM, and YWSW Engaged in Survival Sex” by Dank et al. (2015). An association between social support and engaging in sex work is discussed by Erin C. Wilson et al. (2009). This connection between peer support and sex work is also evident in the context of Daneshjoo Park, though it exhibits distinct characteristics unique to this specific setting.

Actualizing Interaction Conditions

Beyond individual background conditions, we encounter another set of social and network-related circumstances that complement these backgrounds. Referred to as actualizing interaction conditions, these encompass membership and involvement in the social network of sex workers within Daneshjoo Park. The network of sex workers within the park traces its origins back to the park’s inception in the early decades.

Presently, becoming acquainted with the sex workers at Daneshjoo Park, acquiring knowledge of their operational methods through skill training, understanding the

benefits of sex work through interactions with them, witnessing the relative ease of earning income through such work, and ultimately, receiving encouragement and guidance toward sex work form the foundation for the emergence of essential conditions conducive to starting sex work within the park. Furthermore, extensive data collection underscores the significant impact of interactions with sex workers in motivating and persuading individuals to engage in sex work.

Hesam- Homosexual- 19 years old:

“My motivation was money in business (sex work). I saw how easily others were making money... I also saw that all my friends were doing this job easily.”

Mina- Transgender M t F- 26 years old:

“The guys convinced me that when you can’t find a job anywhere, and you’re not given any work, why do you come here and give some free relationships? At least get paid to cover your expenses... I used to engage in unpaid sex work for a while, and then the guys came and said, “Since your situation is like this, why not do business?” From the time they convinced me, I started doing business. {sex work}”

Farhad- Homosexual- 23 years old- Immigrant³:

“I went to someone’s house with the same intention, and he liked me. It was mutually beneficial. He gave me 40,000 Tomans when we returned about 4 or 5 years ago. Since then, I accepted offers from anyone who made them to me.”

Nastaran- Transgender M to F- 26 years old:

“I used to come to the park without knowing what business was, and wearing and behaving casually. The guys would come and say, “Come do a business with us. Come and you have to do this and that.” I watched them, learned what I should do and what I should wear or not. When I saw them making money, I thought to myself, “How long do I have to be dependent on my friends’ homes? How long do I have to ask someone for money?” Every job is hard at first, but when you get into it, you realize what needs to be done. It comes naturally to you. That was the first time here. My friend introduced me, I went, and he told me what to do. I took the money, gave it to him, made a plan, and came back. I got good money and thought, “Wow, it’s so good to make money so easily. Why not stick to it?” When I saw them doing this so clearly, transparently, and flawlessly, I started doing business too.”

An important aspect to consider when elucidating this phenomenon is the process of decision-making inherent to any individual’s choice of action. Two critical factors must align for an action to be chosen: first, there must be a conscious acknowledgment of the action’s possibility, and second, the feasibility of executing that action

³ Iranian from another city.

in reality. In the context of sex work, an individual must first recognize within their consciousness that engaging in such activity is a viable option. Subjectively, they must perceive the emergence and feasibility of this action.

Subsequently, beyond the background conditions, the individual must visualize themselves transitioning from merely acknowledging the possibility of sex work to actively envisioning themselves in that role. While background conditions, such as poverty, may create a conducive environment, they alone do not serve as definitive reasons for the emergence of sex work. The subjective journey from recognizing the potential for this action to envisioning oneself actively engaging in sex work is crucial. In essence, no single background condition acts as a conclusive determinant for the individual. Rather, the individual must navigate the subjective process of transitioning from acknowledging the possibility of sex work to picturing themselves in that role.

The necessity for sex work to manifest is contingent not only on objective conditions but also on subjective factors, including the presence of a viable market. This requisite necessitates further elucidation and illustration. The crucial inquiry is: How do individuals within Daneshjoo Park transition to sex work despite possessing individual background conditions?

At the forefront of this dynamic lies the actualizing interaction conditions, which operate within the current social network of Daneshjoo Park. These conditions not only facilitate the existence of a market for sex work within the park but also foster a sense of identification among individuals who perceive themselves as potential sex workers. By engaging with peers who share similar experiences and identities, individuals glean insights into the norms and practices of sex work. These interactions bridge the gap between the abstract notion of sex work and the concrete reality of envisioning oneself as a sex worker within the park's social landscape.

In the context of today's Daneshjoo Park, these actualizing interaction conditions take precedence, albeit with historical underpinnings. They play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' perceptions and consciousness regarding sex work, ultimately contributing to its manifestation within the park's social fabric.

The issue at hand is deeply rooted in the specific local and historical context of Daneshjoo Park. Understanding this requires a thorough examination of the park's social and historical background to elucidate the factors shaping the phenomenon of sex work within it. Beyond the factors previously discussed, what emerges as influential for park sex workers over several decades is not solely exclusion or poverty but also the presence of enduring relationships and historical precedents within the park's social fabric. What cultural trends characterized Tehran in the past, and how did they intersect with historical and urban developments to shape the enduring institution of Daneshjoo Park?

To differentiate this approach from queer theory, it is important to consider the concept of heteronormative culture, where gay and transgender individuals gather in urban spots to avoid societal exclusion. In Tehran, during a period of heteronormalization, such gatherings might not have been viewed as deviant. However, heteronormalization progressed. At the same time, the nature of social interactions in the park shifted, becoming increasingly monetized. Understanding this process is crucial to comprehending why the park has remained a gathering spot and how it transitioned

from a supportive community to a market for sex work, while still providing support to its members.

Historical Factor

The evolution of the park's community is recounted by three distinct narrators, each representing a different era in the park's history. From its inception to the present day, the park has traversed three distinct phases, each narrated by one of the park's three storytellers.

Initially, "Sh Tehrani" takes on the role of the narrator, portraying the park's early days when interactions among community members were characterized by tradition. Subsequently, "Sh Shomali" assumes the role, chronicling the gradual transformation of the park, marked by a shift from traditional forms of support to monetary exchanges. In the mid-age days after the formation of the park, sex work was a way to secure "rights." In the period "Sh Shomali" as the narrator and guide, sex work was considered a rule for people who date in the park to receive money in exchange.

Today, Kiarash serves as the narrator, offering insights into the history and changes witnessed in the park over the years. As one of the few remaining individuals who have witnessed and retained memories of the park's evolution, Kiarash provides a unique perspective on its development.

Kiarash- The narrator of the park- 40 years old and retired from business. He is telling the story of when he was 20 and started to work at the park:

"Because "Sh Shomali" didn't let you not take money. It was a rule that if you wanted to give someone a free relationship, that was fine, but you shouldn't give relationships away for free just like that."

"Wanting to do business {sex work} was from the time of "Sh Shomali" and it wasn't like this in "Sh Tehrani's time."

In the bygone era, Daneshjoo Park served as a gathering spot for members of Tehran's LGBTQ+ community, albeit under different terminology and societal norms than those prevalent today. The older narrator of the park, known as "Sh Tehrani," recounts a time when terms such as "pederasty" or "*Jamalbazi*" were commonly used in Persian literature to describe these relationships. During this era, what was then termed "male support for a boy/man" or "Amard" represented an antiquated model of gender-neutral and personalized erotic or romantic relationships. This type of relationship aligns with the descriptions provided by Najmabadi (2005) in Qajar Iran.

These relationships were characterized by personal connections, with every man typically accompanied by a girl or boy at social gatherings, cabarets, and both public and private venues. Referred to as a "favorite-one" or "beloved-one," this individual received support, encompassing both material and sexual care, to shield them from harassment and alleviate financial dependence on others.

Yet, beyond mere financial assistance, this support served a deeper purpose. Similar to the act of giving gifts to express affection and attract love, material support provided to these individuals was imbued with the intention of fostering a sense of

belonging. By ensuring their protege's self-sufficiency, benefactors aimed to create a protective barrier around them, signaling to others that they were already taken and discouraging unwanted advances.

Kiarash:

The 'Sh Tehrani' used to recount that in old times, it was customary for individuals to receive material goods and partake in such practices. They recalled an era when there were certain individuals known as 'gentlemen' (Looti), who openly engaged in pederasty and promiscuity, while some of them, who were quite Jealous, kept one partner for themselves. These individuals provided support to them. In bygone days, they were referred to as 'table holders,' a metaphorical term signifying those of higher status who provided sustenance or gathered others as esteemed companions, and they would engage in intimate activities and drinking. It was a point of pride for everyone to have a companion by their side, be it a girl or a boy. During that time, it wasn't considered to be sex work. They assisted their companions to ensure they did not face financial difficulties, purchasing clothes for them and giving them money to carry in their pockets for outings. They made sure their companions always had money on hand, whether it was for a movie or to buy clothes.

The logic of this relationship belongs to the past and is no longer prevalent in contemporary Tehran. The extensive analysis of this phenomenon stems primarily from literary and artistic studies, with only a few remaining narratives serving as indicators of its existence within the cultural ethos of bygone eras.

In the subsequent years, as visitors to the park persisted and new generations emerged, a shift in interaction patterns became apparent. The era depicted by "Sh Shomali" marked the advent of engaging in sexual activities in exchange for monetary compensation within the park. Previously characterized as "support" within the "Jamalbazi" culture, this dynamic gradually evolved towards transactional sex, with individuals now seeking financial remuneration for their services.

In the current context, the prevailing "model of sex work" in Daneshjoo Park is discernible within its existing social network. This network has undergone a transformation in its subculture over time. The past "Jamal-Bazi" culture, or rather the previous cultural norms and identities, now serves as a historical cause for shaping the social network of sex work within Daneshjoo Park. This network, in turn, serves as the "Actualizing Interaction Conditions" that engender the realization of "Individual Background Conditions."

Discussion

For a long time, Tehran's Daneshjoo Park has served as a cultural hub, drawing in both artists and the LGBTQ+ community. Its artistic essence is exemplified by the presence of the City Theatre, while the park itself has become a favored gathering spot for LGBTQ+ individuals. Within the park's diverse social milieu, certain groups stand out amidst the varied social strata that frequent its grounds. Art enthusiasts and university students gravitate towards the City Theatre, while members of

the LGBTQ+ community can be found throughout the park. Within this dynamic, a subset of LGBTQ+ individuals within the park also engage in sex work. LGBTQ members who frequent Daneshjoo Park have come to see it as a “Father’s Garden,” a refuge from the heteronormalized city where they exist as a marginalized group. As described in queer theories, such as those by Delany (2019), which highlight the importance of urban spaces like Times Square for marginalized communities, Daneshjoo Park similarly serves as an essential sanctuary for LGBTQ individuals in Tehran.

The individual background conditions previously discussed—poverty, gender confirmation costs, and social exclusion—reinforce findings from the literature review. Scholars such as Coleman (1989), Allen (1980), Boyer (1989), D’Ippoliti and Botti (2017), and Dank et al. (2015) have emphasized social exclusion as a contributing factor to sex work. Similarly, researchers like Davidson-Arad and Leichtenritt (2004), Howe et al. (2008), Sausa (2007), D’Ippoliti and Botti (2017), Dank et al. (2015), and Mohammadi (2017) have examined the role of absolute and relative poverty in driving the phenomenon of sex work. D’Ippoliti & Botti, Dank et al., and Mohammadi, in particular, address the challenges faced by these individuals in securing employment, while other studies delve into the financial burdens associated with gender confirmation.

Another crucial aspect of transgender sex work in the park pertains to the cultural and legal barriers they encounter in accessing suitable employment opportunities (Mohammadi, 2017). The absence of favorable legal working conditions in Iran, coupled with a lack of official protection, limits the employment options available to Iranian transgender individuals.

These factors draw individuals into the network, facilitating their engagement with the community. As members, they learn about the business and its operations. Through interactions with their peers, they become increasingly drawn to the idea of sex work, which influences their decision-making process, leading them to see themselves in this profession while having the community’s support. This process is described in the study as “Actualizing Interaction Conditions” and examines how it functions within the park. The role of social support and the network is similarly highlighted in studies such as those by Dank et al. (2015) and Wilson et al. (2009).

Drawing on Durkheim’s concept of social facts influencing individual behavior, we can observe that the shift in the historical logic of interactions, as reflected in the dynamics of the Daneshjoo Park network, has caused the emergence of this community that is conducive to sex work among individuals. The dynamics of “support” and “offerings” have evolved, giving way to transactions involving sex in exchange for monetary compensation. This change in interaction logic has not only established a robust support network for sex work but also provided individuals with both support and a marketplace. People facing conditions such as poverty, familial exclusion, and other challenges are thus drawn into sex work within this community.

In this study, it is considered that general social facts influencing individual involvement in sex work as the proximal cause and the historical fact as the distal cause for the construction of this social network in Daneshjoo Park. In other words, the focus of this study is the construction of the sex work network in this park. Therefore, all other facets are examined as reasons behind individual participation in

this business, which are shaped by the societal context of the subject. This includes the relationship between the park and the surrounding city.

It is important to note that the presence of individuals in Daneshjoo Park does not necessarily imply a causal relationship with engaging in sex work, as the park hosts various social networks. This article specifically aims to elucidate the phenomenon of “transsexual/gay sex work in Daneshjoo Park,” rather than offering a general explanation for sex work among LGBTQ+ community members in Tehran. By examining the intersection of these three categories of factors, we can gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of sex work within Daneshjoo Park.

Symptoms and Empowerment Strategies

The study by Moradi et al. (2023) reveals that in a national study involving transgender individuals, depression, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, suicide attempts, and hallucinations were reported as common experiences among the participants. Similarly, in this study, feelings of inferiority, guilt, and psychological distress, often leading to depression, are notably prevalent among LGBTQ+ community members in Daneshjoo Park.

The risks associated with sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, and coercion in sex work within Daneshjoo Park mirror findings from studies such as those by Eftekhari et al. (2020) and Kjaran (2019), highlighting similar challenges despite differing contexts. Additionally, engaging in sex work in the park carries profound personal and societal consequences, often resulting in long-term harm. The lack of legal oversight contributes to an increase in social issues, including the presence of criminal elements and the proliferation of criminal activities within the park.

On a broader scale, the talents, energy, and potential workforce of LGBTQ+ community members involved in sex work could be redirected to more productive endeavors if societal barriers preventing their integration were dismantled. Based on the interviews, venereal diseases, extensive psychological damage, destruction of personal pride, encouragement of addiction, and so on are only a few of the consequences of this job for these young people.

Dismantling the existing social network within Daneshjoo Park would leave individuals vulnerable, stripping away vital social support networks and exacerbating the concealment of sex work and its associated hazards. Furthermore, such action would hinder any prospects for long-term and strategic planning aimed at improving their circumstances in the future.

To uplift individuals within the park’s environment, it is crucial to thoroughly comprehend the intricacies and significance of its social network and refrain from efforts that may lead to its dismantlement or exploitation. The key to managing these circumstances lies in a comprehensive understanding and empowering individuals to instigate lasting change. A fundamental aspect of such intervention involves addressing the underlying background conditions, particularly poverty and housing insecurity. Effective empowerment initiatives should focus on providing adequate housing and facilitating employment opportunities, not merely offering affirmative

action but actively enabling access to resources and support. Moreover, sexual health issues must be addressed comprehensively.

Local institutions can play a pivotal role by actively hiring LGBTQ+ individuals from the park and implementing long-term self-sufficiency plans, such as incorporating them into service sectors and offering training programs. For instance, collaborative efforts could involve jointly producing organizational attire and providing training in clothes production, allowing individuals to earn income directly from the institutions while acquiring valuable skills.

However, this empowerment initiative must extend beyond economic opportunities. There is a crucial need to shift the perception of LGBTQ+ community members from one centered around sexual commodification to one that recognizes their inherent value and agency beyond their involvement in sex work. This transformation in self-perception is both imperative and achievable. Without a collective shift in this understanding, Daneshjoo Park may continue to function as a market for sex work, perpetuating its social network and the meanings it generates.

To facilitate this transformative process, social facilitators, through a social empowerment plan, must actively engage in reshaping perceptions. This includes redefining the concept of support within the community, moving it away from a focus on business transactions. Additionally, efforts to foster a supportive environment between families and the LGBTQ+ community are essential. Through concerted action on these fronts, lasting change can be realized, paving the way for a more inclusive and empowered community.

The integration of empowerment initiatives, social support structures, and sustained counseling services for LGBTQ+ community members has the potential to reshape the dynamics of the current social network within Daneshjoo Park, fostering a healthier urban environment for all. Rather than resorting to widespread criminalization, which could inadvertently exacerbate criminal activity, a more effective approach involves managing the social phenomenon of sex work without criminalizing it. By reframing the meaning of “crime” within Daneshjoo Park and implementing measures to empower sex workers, a more sustainable and balanced solution can be achieved.

Conclusion

This research contributes to the fields of sexual, cultural, and Iranian studies by examining the most well-known gathering spot for the LGBTQ community in Tehran, Daneshjoo Park. Through this study, readers gain insight into LGBTQ life in Iran, with a particular focus on the experiences of sex workers within the park. The findings explain the reasons behind sex work in the park from both global and local perspectives, and empowerment strategies are suggested after reviewing the consequences of this profession for the individuals involved.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The author affirms that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript. There are no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. This research was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities. Participants were informed about the research process, including the recording of their voices, the objectives of the study, and their consent for publication of the article. No identifiable information was displayed during the interviews, and all records were deleted after transcription and coding. Prior to each interview, participants were fully briefed on the research. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, the author took utmost care to ensure the safety of participants. All qualitative research standards outlined in Corbin and Strauss (2008) were meticulously adhered to.

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